

The Clipper Visits Pang-Yeng and Lao Her

Text and photos by Nancy Anne Dawe

*"Because the road was steep and long
And through a dark and lonely land,
God set upon my lips a song
And placed a lantern in my hand."*

Author Unknown

As Dr. "Skip" Schippers turned his car onto the pressway heading north one Wednesday in mid-March, the late-afternoon skies looked ominous: heavy, gray clouds overhanging the horizon; occasional raindrops scattering across the windshield. His car was one of several vehicles carrying his wife, Patsy, Pilgrim Church's 2 ministers, and other members of its Laotian Refugee Committee to Logan Airport -- to welcome a Laotian family they were sponsoring, and of whom they, as yet, knew little. Simultaneously, the TWA airliner, carrying Pang-Yeng Her, his wife, Lao, and infant son, Pao, was starting its slow descent on the final leg of a flight from San Francisco; a trip marking the end of a very long journey, and the beginning of another.

For weeks now, the refugee committeemen had been working hard, preparing a Duxbury apartment for a new life for the Hers -- and Patsy Schippers had been among them. Sitting in the back seat -- exhausted but exhilarated -- downing the sandwich she'd been too busy for at lunch, she recounted the events that had led to this day.

In January, she, Norman Martin, and Janet Ritch, all members of Pilgrim Church's Church and Community Committee -- prior to their regular monthly meeting, had coincidentally seen the same TV news, and all of them had been moved by the plight of the "boat people." Sharing their concern that night with the full committee, "we decided we should go beyond ourselves in meeting some needs."

The spark of that idea was further fanned when Pilgrim's Associate Minister John Vincze invited the Rev. Roscoe Riley of Hanover, who had started a refugee committee on the ministerial association level in Plymouth County, to speak to the group.

Rev. Riley's church had already happily settled 6 or 7 Laotian families in the Hanover-Whitman area, and he was accompanied by one of them. Cheerful Mrs. Ai Her, and her children, had adjusted beautifully, and she told of her husband's cousin, wife, and child -- the family that would ultimately be Pilgrim's.

Stock up on Coca-Cola, she'd advised, and apple juice, pork, chicken, green beans. And expect that they would only want to sleep, at first. "But what about a party the day they arrive?" she was asked. Oh yes! Party!" she'd enthusiastically replied.

After the Church and Community Committee voted to proceed, a Laotian Refugee subcommittee was formed, chaired by John Stanton. It was divided into 7 sections to encompass every need: Janet Ritch would handle publicity; Patsy, food and clothing; Linda Wisner, medical; John and Doris Kolstad, furnishings; Sue Cook, education -- for they'd be transported to and from Boston for English lessons; babysitting and special arrangements were Mary Farconi's; and clean-up committee, organizing an apartment, was a job to be co-chaired by Linda

Wisner and Patsy.

The Sunday after the vote, when the Rev. Steve Turrell preached about the refugees, a man in the congregation, noting the housing need, said, "I'll bet I can help you out." He offered a third floor apartment in a building he owned in Hall's Corner, saying it needed cleaning, but could be their home.

After that, things happened fast.

Linda, Patsy, and other loving hands disinfected, scrubbed, and cleaned -- washing walls, emptying closets, painting, wallpapering, turning the apartment into an imaginative delight. Donations flooded in -- rugs, furniture, dishes, silverware, pots and pans -- everything needed to furnish a galley kitchen, sitting room, small bath with shower, bedroom with a special nook gaily decorated for the child, and tucked under the eaves, a cubby-hole playroom, stacked with toys.

"It was almost eerie," Patsy Schippers says, "and it started the very first day. Within a matter of moments, we'd get what we needed. When I said, 'gee, I wish I had some scissors and contact paper, somebody showed up, and that was exactly what they'd brought.'"

Money came, too, \$3600 worth, for food and the first 6 months rent; and a job offer for Lao Her, the wife. The committee and other volunteers felt bonded working for this common cause, and Patsy, already loved the as-yet unmet Hers. "They were family," she says.

Ai Her, her husband, and 2 of their 7 children joined the committee at the airport, to ease the transitional culture shock for their cousins. Ai's oldest child, her 17-year-old son, Chang, provided fascinating background facts of what the Laotians had been through.

All the Hers were Hmong, historically, an independent clan of warriors, who'd arrived in Southeast Asia more than a century ago. Originally migrating from China, approximately 300,000 of them had settled in Laos and Thailand, and now were mostly farmers. Chang's father, however, had been a policeman in the capital city, while his mother had sold food in a store.

Because they didn't support the communists, they'd been forced to flee, spending 3 years in a Thai refugee camp. In broken, but clear English, he described what conditions for the then 8-member family had been like (another child was subsequently born in the States): "Life there very, very hard. No

food...2 lbs. fish, 25 lbs. rice in month for whole family...vegetables, a quarter pound each week. Get thin...get sick...no medicine. We had to build our own house...tent, plastic, covered outside to protect from rain." They'd been put there because they had no place to live, and otherwise would have been killed.

The cousins flying in, he said, had also had no food. If one grew rice, the Communists would come and kill them. So they'd eaten leaves, cut from a tree that resembled a coconut tree, moving all the time, until they'd reached the Bangkok refugee camp, where they'd stayed 6 months.

Chang and his family had prospered in their 18 months in the U.S. "Is a very nice country," he said. His father had gotten work in a Whitman foundry; and after school (where he makes the honor roll), Chang worked until 6:30 each day.

By now the plane was taxiing in, the passengers soon passing through the gate. And there, at last, wearing thongs, were Pang-Yeng Her, his face tentative and apprehensive, and Lao -- broad-cheeked and quiet, holding her crying son in one arm, a metal pail with a jug of water and clean diapers in the other.

But the transition proved easy, the "American" relatives laughingly chatting; the men walking together, Lao being handed a leather bag crammed with sweater, diapers and a teddy bear for the child.

In the hours ahead, a party would indeed take place. Says committee member Doris Kolstad, who'd furnished the apartment: "All the Hers went upstairs and went through, and you could hear the happy reaction. When Pang-Yeng turned in the bedroom and saw the nook for the child, he was just thrilled! They loved the supper we'd prepared (eaten together with the entire committee); and to see Pang-Yeng's face, going from scared getting off the plane to such joy up there, you wouldn't believe!"

For Patsy Schippers, "the most tender spot was seeing Lao lying on the toy room floor, watching her son running from toy to toy"; and in the days that followed, Patsy would make other observations, as she served as liaison to their new life.

She would find them shivering the first morning under 4 layers of clothes, teaching them to turn up the thermostat, then returning the next day to find them comfortable -- at 95 degrees. There was the doctor to be visited, shoes to be bought, and extra food to stock, for the famished family in the first 24 hours had eaten everything in the refrigerator: pork chops, a fryer, a dozen oranges, bananas, and a bag of apples.

She would see them sparkling-eyed and eager, teaching them words, noting how bright Pang-Yeng was; and come to feel that they, too, had been city folk. "They were so adjusted," she says, "the kitchen immaculate, the pots and pans all scrubbed." They knew quality, too, choosing good leather shoes for their cold, unprotected feet.

And she would learn that though Pang-Yeng's father had been a farmer, he, himself, had been a student, wanting to learn as much as he could, wanting to "be somebody."

She would hope that ensuing needs would also soon be met: a job for Pang-Yeng, who must repay the loan that brought them to the States, and then assume the rent after his first half-year; extra money for food, as the budget will be higher than expected; and people to transport them into town for lessons. And already, help was coming in, someone offering a sewing machine.

But the day of their arrival, it was enough to know that after they had landed, and the committee's cars had left the airport heading south, the rain had cleared and the sky had lightened, spilling golden sun over lavender clouds.

And in the little apartment at Hall's Corner, Duxbury, Massachusetts, USA, won ton soup was waiting.



A happy mix of native and "new" Americans awaiting the plane that was bringing the Hers. L to r: Patsy Schippers, one of the guiding lights of the Laotian Refugee Committee; chairman John Stan-

ton, smiling with delight; Mrs. Ai Her of Whitman her husband, Cho-Neng Her, whose cousin was flying in, and their son, Chang. Backs to camera are Mrs. Steve Turrell and Mrs. Doris Kolstad.



Pang-Yeng Her, 28; his wife, Lao, 27, and son, Pao, 20 months, moments after their arrival at Logan Airport on April 16.